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ABSTRACT

Recent use of the "New Yorker" Education Program in an upper division non-fiction writing class in the School of Journalism of the University of Tennessee proved to be very effective. Initially, the numerous assignments to read detailed articles appeared overwhelming to the students, but they soon learned the importance of reading as the first step to becoming reporters and writers. Gradually students became eager to share with the class specific information and writing techniques utilized in the articles they had read. Of particular value were the reviews and critiques students wrote about their assigned articles, similar to the critiques they produced for each others' works concerning leads, syntax, grammar, organization, readability, etc. Soon students became familiar with the magazine's writers and identified quickly with the various youth reporters, observing the reporters' methods and frustrations in the writing process. A key lesson was the insight students gained about the individual ways writers and artists create to please themselves. Videotapes also demonstrated how much education, knowledge and experience are necessary to become a readable and credible writer. Additionally, books about the magazine and its writers further enlightened students about the reality of the profession in the areas of actual relationships between writers and editors and internal politics. (KEH)

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The New Yorker Education Program

And How It Was Used in One Classroom

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The New Yorker Education Program
And How It Was Used In One Classroom

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"I never would have gone to see Dead Ringer if I hadn't read a review of it in the New Yorker," (Terrence Rafferty, Oct. 3, 1988, pp. 92-94) the student said. With a toss of her head, she spoke of the insight the review gave her into the film, and told of explaining its symbolism to the friends who attended with her. "I told them I read about it in the New Yorker," she added with a pleased "know-it-all" air.

This was a first reaction to the New Yorker in a non-fiction writing class in the School of Journalism at the University of Tennessee as the magazine's first Education Program began in 1988. Most students were reading the magazine for the first time. There were no complaints about the cost: $5 for the three-month required subscription. A few did complain about "plowing through" some articles they considered too detailed. But before the semester was over, they knew the professor expected them to be equally detailed.

The students' curiosity was aroused about subjects they had never considered before, such as living on the side of mountains that periodically slide into Los Angeles as told by John McPhee. (Also Oct. 3, 1988, pp. 72-90). "He shows so much--especially the geology!" one student exclaimed. To Pauline Kael's comment that "kids in the Mid-

west read the magazine to keep from getting crazy," the same young man was wide-eyed. "What does she mean--kids?" But he and the others loved the tape of Kael lecturing on how she goes about her movie reviewing. They also liked and learned from tapes, reprints, and even miniature covers of New Yorkers sent for the "show and tell" part of the education package.

Students asked the professor, "How do you expect us to read all of the magazine every week?" With assignments related to their own writing--personalities, places, events, interviews, and personal experiences, as well as critiques--read it they did. The professor, who has struggled to help students realize they must read if they are to be reporters--writers, thought, "Ah so. This is one of the best ways yet."

Some students dared to be critical. "I wish some of the writers wouldn't use 'I' and 'we' so much," said one. This was a heartening remark too, since the professor had emphasized avoiding such usage unless the writer is part of the story.

Exposed to several weeks' issues, students were eager to learn more about the magazine and its writers from the videotapes lent as part of the New Yorker Education Program. Although the tapes were made for magazine promotion and not specifically for the classroom, they fit in well. Writers, Artists, and Four From The New Yorker helped students identify quickly with the youth of such writers as Ann Beattie, Mark Singer, and Jamaica Kincaid. The students smiled with superiority as they watched the well-known John McPhee "hunt and peck" however efficiently, as journalism majors had to learn the touch

touch method to pass a typing test before admission. They also saw McPhee laboriously type out all of his handwritten notes before organizing his material. They again looked a bit smug since they were taught to think, organize, and edit at word processors. And when McPhee admitted to taking a short nap as a nervous response to pressure between heavy bouts of writing and editing, they pleaded with the professor, "Why can't we do that too?"

From McPhee, however, they learned what professors have often told them: they must research, think, and edit to be accurate about details. They must learn to separate the material they gather according to thematic structural patterns. McPhee reminded them that "writing is hard work," with months and years spent on some projects. Such pros as Kevin O'Neill and Roger Angell explained more about the "hard work" of writing, a realization students were beginning to have. Perhaps this concept sank in, when Singer said, "You're alone when you write, but colleagues and institutional support help." Students said they wished they were ready to get such support from the New Yorker, but having heard Singer, realized that they get it first from professors, their peers, and university publications.

Assigned to critique some of the in-depth non-fiction articles in the same way they critique each other's work (i.e.; by commenting on leads, syntax, grammar, organization, readability, etc.), they first taught the professor that they had difficulty distinguishing some New Yorker fact from fiction. A discussion revealed a few rather strange ways they had of evaluating which is which, but continuing, they learned that fiction has to seem more like truth than non-fiction. Who

would believe some of the factual Profiles or Reporter At Large pieces if they were printed as fiction? The students came to understand that the truths of life contain more ironies and twists of fate than most fiction readers would accept. From the magazine's Check the Facts booklet, they learned that fiction writing has to be as carefully fact-checked and edited for accuracy of the material it contains as does non-fiction.

The students enjoyed and learned from Many Bens, John Updike's A Critic At Large piece (Feb. 22, 1988, pp. 105-110) reprinted in booklet form."I had no idea Ben Franklin was such a 'ladies man'," one student wrote on the final test, adding, "The title was perfect because there were indeed many Bens--philosopher, scientist, inventor, and 'sexy' lover." Another mentioned new knowledge about Franklin's having written, "We hold these truths to be self-evident. . ." Another wrote, "I've always seen him as a slightly crazy man with a kite and a key, with his long gray hair swirling around his head in the midst of a storm. That's a far cry from the liberal ladies' man painted by John Updike." Still another: "I think his speech warning of the dangers of 'making our Posts of Honour Places of Profit' was very wise." And one more: "My favorite part was Franklin's Paris days; how as a 70-year-old man the city fell in love with him. He felt years younger and traipsed around the city like the young man he was at heart."

Another final test question concerned Ulster Spring (Nov. 21, 1988, pp. 94-132), a Reporter at Large piece entitled "Belfast" by Bill Barich. Students' comments included:

> I gained insight on the country of Ireland from a journalist's point of view. I have always imagined Ireland to be a cold, rainy, uninviting country. However, the writer shows how beautiful it can be, with balmy temperatures and blossoming chestnut and elder trees. The writer also reveals the skepticism of the Irish, who seem unwilling to believe those giving formal speeches. Their overall distrust of words, however, seems to be overshadowed by the general good cheer that abounds in the hearts of many.

Several wrote about gaining new understanding of the long fight between Protestants and Catholics. More than one expressed amazement that terrorism exists in such a place and even greater amazement that the Irish people think this situation is ordinary. One wrote, "It was hard for me to believe there could be so much bloodshed over religion, since I live in a society where religion is so intermixed that I don't know that of the girl sitting next to me."

Other non-fiction pieces the students selected as "best," for a review assignment, included Around City Hall: Last Innings by Andy Logan (Nov. 7, 1988, pp. 139-146), and were delighted to learn that Andy Logan is a woman. One or more parts of the Reporter At Large "Old South" series, (Oct. 24, 31, and Nov. 7, 1988) by V. S. Naipaul; Letter From Moscow by Robert Cullen (Oct. 17, 1988, pp. 98-109); Nothing More to Wish For, a Reporter At Large piece on "A German Family," by Susan Sheehan (Nov. 21, 1988, pp. 43-83), and Profiles: Modern Girl (Chiyo Uno, Oct. 31, 1988) by Phyllis Birnbaum. In some cases two or three students chose to review the same articles, making for contrasts and comparisons in class discussions. Again some dared to criticize some aspects of organization or writing, but all demonstrated that they better understood various writing techniques

used, as well as the effectiveness of description and rhetoric to "show," not just "tell," about real-life situations.

Even though no artists declared themselves in the class, the students were fascinated with a video account of how magazine covers are chosen by Lee Lorenz, art editor. As with writers, they learned that artists must first please themselves, and find their own "voices." Students met Ed Koren's furry people and watched as some of them became birds with human qualities under the guidance of an editor. They heard the late Charles Addams explain his dark humor. Most of all, they became acquainted with the individual ways writers and artists create to please themselves. This was an important lesson for students who often asked the professor, "But what is it you want?" Previously they seemed not to understand, "I want your best," and "There is no one correct way to do anything."

Assigning books about the magazine for review was another success. Some students chose James Thurber's The Years With Ross, (Little Brown, Boston, 1959) and Brendan Gill's Here at The New Yorker, (Random House, Inc., N. Y., 1975) were chosen by some students. Others chose such new books as Year of Change: More About the New Yorker and Me, by E. J. Kahn, Jr. (Viking-Penguin Inc., New York, 1988), and The Last Days of the New Yorker, by Gigi Mahon (McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, New York, etc., 1988). Not only did the students demonstrate what they had learned about the magazines, its founders, its management, in the written reviews, but shared them with their peers in a class discussion.

During the second semester of the course, one student chose to review Fatal Vision by Joe McGinnis (Putnam Publishing Group, New York, 1953). Her choice was inspired by the New Yorker's controversial two-part series, Reflections: The Journalist and the Murderer by Janet Malcolm (March 13, pp. 38-73, and March 20, 1989, pp. 49-82). These articles sparked a good discussion of journalistic ethics, as practiced not only by New Yorker writers, but also by the publications that carried follow-up criticism about the series. Having completed an objective review, the student concluded:

> After reading the book in light of what Janet Malcolm said in the New Yorker articles, I concluded that Joe McGinnis may have betrayed MacDonald's trust by pretending to believe in his innocence, but McGinnis certainly did not "invent" MacDonald. The man, in all his contradictions, is painfully evident throughout the book, and the evidence against him, though circumstantial, was overwhelming.
>
> I did not agree with Malcolm in her opinion that McGinnis took a rather ordinary man and enlarged his negative qualities until they appeared sinister enough for book material. The evidence was quite sinister enough.

Undoubtedly the use of the New Yorker in the classroom can be carried on with greater enthusiasm if the professor has a long acquaintanceship with the magazine, loves it, and wants to share--not only its contents, but its history. The students expressed appreciation of this, particularly as they completed their required end-of-term book reviews. Some explored the realities of how the magazine functioned, particularly during 1987, the year a new publisher and a third editor took over. Recent books written about this period helped the professor as well as the students.

Kahn's volume is a valuable, gossipy book, with 621 names dropped. The reader got insider glimpses of how the magazine survived

and/or changed since the takeover by S. I. Newhouse and the replacement of long-time editor William Shawn by Robert Gottlieb, formerly chief editor for the Alfred A. Knopf publishing house. The book covers Kahn's work of the 1987, as well as that of past years, including his travels, thoughts, and reflections about events and relationships, past and present. Insider glimpses begin with Kahn's revelation that it was Shawn who first told him he would be replaced by Gottlieb on March 1. Even forewarned, Kahn's nervousness and ambivalence about the change is apparent. Rumors fly that the takeover would be sooner, and Kahn dreamt of a padlocked office with security people barring entry.

"The Letter" from 160 magazine staffers asking Gottlieb to step down made news in many publications, but not in the one it concerned. The first signature was that of Roger Angell, an editor and in-depth sports writer. Angell is the son of the late Katherine White, herself one of the magazine's writers and editors, and second wife of E. B. White, a long-time contributor to the magazine. Kahn referred to "our letter," so apparently he signed it. But not everyone signed, Lee Lorenz, for one. Kahn reflected from time to time throughout the book about the manuscripts Shawn purchased from him but never published. He speculated that at least one, completed in 1978, just might suit Gottlieb. Such ambivalent speculations are the stuff of comfort to all magazine free-lance writers, including students.

Kahn wrote that he was not invited to sign the full-page sentimental tribute to Shawn in Variety: mainly it was signed by "the younger set" of writers on the magazine, including Jamaica Kincaid,

Shawn's daughter-in-law who was "going public with her private grief." Yes, this is the same Kincaid who is seen in the New Yorker promotion film extolling the wonders of having her work "picked out of the slush pile" to be published in the magazine, Picked out, indeed! Innocent and not-so-innocent students learned that nepotism (and politics) prevail at the New Yorker just as they do in almost any institution. This is not to say, however, that the relatives are not fine writers. As for the fact that one of the first long reviews in the post-Gottlieb New Yorker was of a book by a Knopf author, Kahn commented, "This is the sort of talk we are going to have to get used to--and shrug off."

Kahn, who termed himself a "non-salaried non-editor," revealed a great deal about such writers' relationships with editors, as well as about the difficulties in getting some subjects to be "profiled." He also chronicled the problems that arise when a long piece sits around for a year or more. A subject has to be called back by a fact checker to verify quotes, only to have the subject deny what he said originally. "And we think we have problems now," exclaimed one hopeful future magazine free-lancer.

Then there is the problem of "additions" when the piece has been purchased some time before. Is more pay forthcoming or not? Depends on the editor handling it, Kahn wrote. All of this is part of the reality student writers must know. Students learned that the new editor "has no intention of using a lot of the inventory, old or new, that's lying around. . . Nor does the new editor plan 'a la Shawn, to buy whole books and serialize them." Kahn learned later that of all the long

fact pieces Shawn had bought and hoarded, only 15 or 20 remained in the bank, "my UNICEF 'Profile' not among them."

Students noted along with Kahn that the New Yorker never had a masthead but now has an index that can be found on virtually the same page every week. This is a welcome change for readers since it is no longer buried among many other small type items in the "Goings on about town" section. Students sympathized with Kahn when he discovered that in one edition with a healthy 158 pages, 44 pages were actually an advertising insert. "Once I've tugged this out and thrown it away, the magazine seems dismayingly thin," Kahn wrote. (Kahn informed readers that Walter Bingham labeled such inserts "advertorials".) Of course, advertising majors in the class realized that if they aim to write for such inserts, they must write more carefully.

Another book teachers of magazine writing classes may find useful is (outsider) Gigi Mahon's The Last Days of The New Yorker. (McGraw Hill Publishing Company, 1988.) Although the book title may seem to portend the kiss of death for the magazine, the text is better. Contained here is a definitive history of the New Yorker, including not just the infighting and stock maneuvering, but much about changes in tone and philosophy over the years since its founding. Students of media business hardly could believe the detailed account of stock price jumps that occurred as rumors and more rumors of buyouts of the magazine continued prior to its purchase by S. I. Newhouse, head of the giant media conglomerate, Advance Publications. Students who previously disdained the study of media business and economics, and stuck to college requirements strictly in these fields became

fascinated by the manipulations of such business forces as Raoul Fleischmann, and his son Peter, president George Green, investors Phillip Messinger and William Reik, and finally Newhouse, the victor. In addition to the massive amount of information on the business side, the Mahon book also contains many details about the work of the magazine's best known writers.

As time went on and students read more issues, they agreed that the magazine has changed, and will likely continue to change. But they also agreed that the New Yorker, "perhaps the best magazine in the world," as its advertising claims, will never die. Several students said they intended to begin personal subscriptions "as soon as I graduate and get a job."

Books about the New Yorker add a new dimension to its use in the classroom. But with or without them, the magazine's education program is a worthwhile enterprise for upper division and graduate students. It is definitely not for beginners. The tapes provided convey the impression that selling to the magazine is easy. But for more advanced students who know better, the program is a prize. As noted, the cost to students is minimal, and a professor can easily fold assignments from the magazine into a semester plan. Material for each class is different, making its introduction more stimulating to students and professors and impossible to copy from one class to the next. Having students read the same articles from issue to issue is not only helpful to them in writing specific articles of their own, but also good for class discussion and student reports. Students who hear each

other rave about the unassigned articles they read are challenged to read them too.

Elaine Berman, program director, is helpful with materials, notes, and newsletters. She is reachable via an 800 number. It is hoped that the program will not only continue, but also expand. For example, the second video in the first pair sent is too brief. More tapes like the one of Kael speaking in Washington, D.C. are needed to demonstrate how much education, knowledge, and experience are necessary to become a readable and credible writer. Students are impressed to hear authors tell just how much effort they put into their work, not just how wonderful it is that they get to do it for the New Yorker.